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ABSTRACT

Two ideas about language as communication that can guide teachers' thinking about language, their observations of their pupils' language, and their curriculum planning activities are that (1) language is a social enterprise, and (2) language provides the means of distancing oneself from the here and now. When teachers make use of these two ideas, children can begin to understand the necessity of considering their audience and the ways such consideration can be accomplished. Along with becoming aware of audience, children may come to appreciate contextual elements of language use such as time, place, and purposes of communication. Teachers can appraise a child's language use to see whether or not audience has been considered. When the audience is neglected, corrective exercises can be provided. Children's use of language to distance themselves from the here and now also has a number of implications for teachers' thinking. Ways of incorporating spatial, temporal, and imaginative distancing into the curriculum include using fairy tales, fables, and myths, and encouraging all types of writing. Teachers should realize that they are models of language use and that, in order to help children understand the relationship between language and places and times at a distance, children need to hear teachers using language beyond the scope of the curriculum. (RH)

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Language Development as Communication Development

by David Kuschner

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Introducing the Author

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INSIGHTS into open education

Language Development as Communication Development

By David Kuschner
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There is no question that language is a vital part of the human experience. We are social beings and language helps us to form and maintain our connections with other people. It follows, therefore, that language is also a very important part of our educational programs and of the places in which these programs take place, our schools. Language is certainly the primary mode of instruction in our schools. In addition, there are many packaged curriculum kits available (e.g., Peabody Early Experiences Kit) for the teacher to use in creating language activities. Finally, many of our judgments concerning the abilities of children are based upon their language performance.

When we think about language and language development, we frequently focus on the development of grammar, articulation and vocabulary. Many of our efforts at fostering language development focus on these three areas. The purpose of this essay is to suggest an alternative focus. The development of grammar, articulation skills and vocabulary are certainly important. They are, however, the tools of language or the abilities that allow us to carry out the main purpose of language, which is communication. Children develop good grammar, good articulation skills and a large vocabulary through their efforts at communication. Research has shown, for example, that when language interactions between parents and children are analyzed, one sees very few instances of parental correction of children's grammar. What is evident is that parents are attending to the meaning of what their children are attempting to communicate. Embedded in the parents' responses are models of more complete and grammatically correct sentences which also contain additional vocabulary. Children use these models to help them formulate the rules of the language, but this happens almost incidentally to their communication effort. Both parents and children are focusing on meaning (Cazden, 1981; Schachter, 1979).

Although there are a multitude of ideas related to the topic of language as communication, there are two in particular that I feel have tremendous potential for serving as a framework with which teachers can think about language, observe the language of their children and create curriculum activities. These are: language as a social enterprise and language as providing the power to distance oneself from the here and now.

LANGUAGE AS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

As mentioned earlier, we are social beings and language is perhaps the primary way in which we engage in social interactions. I have observed many young children who were having difficulty interacting with other children and in many cases much of this difficulty could be traced to their lack of the appropriate language skills for creating and maintaining positive social interactions. As a result, some of these children would engage in aggressive and disruptive

behavior, often directed at other children, because this was a means for initiating some sort of social interaction. I remember one child who resorted to pointing to a stop sign in an effort to get a group of children to stop their activity and acknowledge his presence. This child did in fact have language problems and simply did not have the skills to engage those children in an interaction.

As everyone knows, children are not born talking. At first their attempts at communication are not very social at all. They cry and hope (not consciously, of course) that someone hears their cry and then responds appropriately. The cry is usually a response to an internal or external disturbance of some kind. There is no question that the infant is communicating about something, and despite the frustrations experienced by all parents after a few sleepless nights, no one would want a baby that did not cry; it is their only way of communicating their needs.

Despite the importance of crying and its relationship to the beginning of communication interactions, we cannot say that the child is actually communicating to someone. The cry is not really intended for the social other. The cry is a very personal and idiosyncratic response to a disturbance. A response to the child is dependent on an adult being able to interpret what the child needs. Fortunately parents are very good at interpreting these early attempts at communication. Parents report that they are able to differentiate between their child's cries and know if the child is hungry, uncomfortable, tired, etc. There is a communicative interchange (i.e., baby cries -- parent responds) but the responsibility for the meaning within the communication rests with the parent's interpretation.

Before long, children's attempts at communication become more social in nature. They begin to learn the sounds, words and intonation patterns of the language spoken around them. In a very real sense they are trying to break the code of the language that they are hearing. They have some sense that by breaking the code and learning the language they will have a powerful tool for creating interactions with the people around them. The child has discovered something very important about language and the use of language, its social nature. When you use language there is most often an audience. Language is the means by which we communicate about something to somebody. This awareness and subsequent consideration of audience is critical if language is to fully serve its social function.

Consideration of audience. As adult users of the language, we are continually making adjustments, sometimes gross and sometimes fine, at times conscious and at times not, in our use of the language. A formal speech to a community group elicits different language use than a discussion with a spouse, even though the content of the discussion may be that of the formal speech. We may change our pacing, vocabulary, intonation or level of explanation. These changes come about because of our consideration of audience: their background, interest level, experience, familiarity with the subject matter, educational level, etc. Changes in language may also be based upon the relationship we have (or do not have) with our audience. If we perceive them in some sense as being more powerful, we may use one kind of language; if we perceive them as equals, our language may be different.

Children during the early childhood years are grappling with the task of learning about the need for considering their audience and then about ways in which it can be accomplished. Piaget's concept of egocentrism is a classic example of this problem (Piaget, 1955). According to Piaget, young children tend to believe that their perspective of the world is held by everyone else. They assume that everyone sees things the same way they do. Egocentrism is a cognitive assumption. In terms of language, egocentrism results in what Piaget calls the collective monologue (Piaget, 1955). The collective monologue occurs when children around the sand table or during snack will each be talking as if she/he is being listened to by all the other children. What is actually happening is that everyone is talking and no one is listening.

There is some question as to whether or not the young child is as prone to egocentrism as Piaget believed her/him to be (see Donaldson, 1978), but it is probably true that all people, regardless of age, have the potential for being egocentric under certain circumstances. As Flavell (1977) writes, we may be at risk for egocentrism all our lives and the greater the information processing load, the greater the potential for egocentric thinking. It is possible, therefore, that young children may have a greater potentiality for egocentric thinking than adults. While it is true that a four year old will talk differently to a one year old baby than she will to her eight year old sister, the same four year old, when asked to describe her house, will do so by using certain referents that are familiar only to herself. She will not realize that more specific information must be provided in order for the listener to be able to visualize her house. As a determiner of developmental stages, egocentrism may not have very much utility, but as a concept to be used when analyzing what children are saying, it may have a great deal of power.

Audience is just one component of the larger concept of context. Context includes the time, place, purposes, etc. of the communication. The importance of context in terms of language cannot be overemphasized because without context language is devoid of meaning. If someone says, "You must try this," that statement means one thing if it was a parent trying to get a child to eat his dinner and it means something very different if the person is a party host offering hors d'oeuvres to a guest. Along with audience, children must come to appreciate the importance of context in general. As teachers, we are frequently reminding children of the importance of context, as manifested in such statements as, "Remember to use your outside voices when you are on the playground and your inside voices when you are in the classroom."

What are the implications for teaching that can be drawn from the discussion of the need for the consideration of audience? First, it is important to note what I did not include in the discussion. There were no statements about the age at which children can or cannot take their audience into consideration. I do not find statements of developmental ages particularly helpful; they can also give us the excuse for not observing the children in our classrooms. The important point for teachers is to realize that consideration of audience is crucial for the social use of language. This then provides the framework with which the teacher can listen to the language of children. She can

formulate what Joan Tough calls an appraisal of children's language (Tough, 1976). Situations and circumstances in which a particular child does or does not consider his audience can be noted. Once this is done, the teacher can create new or modify existing activities in order to encourage children's consideration of audience (and context). A personal example may help to illustrate this process.

A few years ago I was working with a five year old child who particularly enjoyed reading and telling stories into a tape recorder. One of his favorites was the wordless picture book, Pancakes for Breakfast, by Tomie de Paola. During one of our sessions, he had read the story into the recorder once and then wanted to do it a second time. I suggested that for the second reading we make a slight change; I would turn my back so that I would not be able to see the book (we were sitting side by side). He accepted this change and read the story for the second time. When I listened to the tape after he had left, I was struck by the differences in the two readings. The second reading had much more description, vocabulary and detail. He seemed to understand that because I could not see the pictures he would have to provide me with additional information. As a result, he provided more description etc.

It is true that since it was a second reading of the story it may have had an effect on the child's language. On the other hand, he had done multiple readings of other stories without the changes in his language that occurred during the second reading of Pancakes for Breakfast. He also seemed to be very aware of the fact that I could not see the pictures in the book. Any activity like this one, that encourages children to think about their audience, may also result in children adjusting their language. Due to the need to describe more detail, additional vocabulary is used; out of the need to provide more explanation of story, more complex sentences are produced. In other words, taking one's audience into consideration is not only an important social process, but it may also result in the general exercise of language abilities.

THE DISTANCING POWER OF LANGUAGE

One of the powers that is facilitated by language is the ability to distance ourselves from the here and now; the ability to think about things that may be at a distance from ourselves. We can use language to act on some part of the world that is spatially separate from ourselves. My transmitting ideas to you through the written word is an example of using language to bridge the distance of space. Technological advances like the telephone and the computer increase the space that can be bridged. This particular power of language was made very clear to me when I was playing with an 18 month old child as part of a class demonstration. We were sitting at a table playing with blocks, when one of the blocks rolled off the table and fell to the floor. The child looked at me, pointed at the block on the floor, and said, "Go get." That is when I learned how powerful language can be and how the young child's world must grow exponentially when he begins to develop language.

Language can also be used to bridge the distance of time. Experiences that we are having right now can be connected to experiences we (or others) have had in the past.

In a similar fashion, our present experiences can be related to experiences we may have in the future. We can use language to predict and at times control the future. Again a young child illustrated this power to me. I had been spending time in a day care center and during one session had brought in a novel toy for the children to experience. About a week later, George, a fairly verbal four year old, asked me when I would be bringing that particular toy back to the day care center. I said that I would bring it the next time I came, if I could remember. He then proceeded to get a piece of paper and a pencil and said that he would write me a note so that I would remember. He understood, at least in a functional sense, that language could be used to control events in the future.

Finally, language can remove us from what we know and believe to be true. Imaginary worlds can be created, hypotheses can be generated and tested and even lies can be told. Fairy tales, myths and science fiction can be appreciated; contrary to fact ideas which can be played with. Once language is developed, we are no longer tied to communicating about the here and now as we know it; we can communicate about experiences and events that took place "once upon a time," in a land "far, far away."

Children's use of language to distance themselves from the here and now has a number of interesting implications for looking at children in school. Again it is not important whether or not the average five year old or the average second grader can or cannot use language for the purpose of distancing. What is important is to appraise the language of children in our classrooms in order to see to what degree and under what circumstances they use language for the purpose of distancing. Research conducted in England by Joan Tough (1977) points out that children do come to school with differing abilities or predispositions for using language for the purpose of distancing. Tough suggests that the children who do not readily use language to bridge spatial or temporal distance may in fact be at a disadvantage when it comes to succeeding in school. In her study, for example, there was a group of children who were much less likely to bring past experience to bear on some present experience and were less likely to project into the future; two activities that may make up much of their school experience.

There are many ways in which children's use of language for the purpose of distancing can be incorporated into the curriculum. As alluded to earlier, the use of fairy tales, fables, myths, etc. is a major source of language used for the creation and/or bridging of distance; spatially, temporally and in terms of imagination. All types of writing should be encouraged, from the writing of stories and letters, to the writing of shopping lists, because a major purpose of writing is to bridge the distance of time and space. You can send a letter to someone far away, and as George suggested, you can make a list to remind yourself to do something at some point in the future.

It is also important for teachers to be aware of their own language. Very often the uses of language we model as teachers may be constrained and limited by the goals we have for our curriculum. We need to be aware of the fact that we are models of more than just good grammar and articulation, but that we are also models of language use. Children need to hear us using language to connect ourselves to places and times at a distance.

SUMMARY

Consideration of audience and action at a distance are just two aspects of language that children come to learn about as they progress through the process of language development. There are certainly other aspects that teachers should be familiar with and that have important implications for what we do in our classrooms. What these two concepts represent are perhaps the two general ideas about language and language development that are critical for every teacher to consider. The first is that language is a social phenomenon, consideration of audience being but one example of that fact. The second is that in addition to learning what language is (i.e., sounds, words, rules of grammar), children learn what language does; they learn that language has power. Our classrooms should be places where children are given the opportunity to develop control over that power and to share their language with others.

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"MY TEACHER"

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